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Nixon hints U.S., Soviets reach tentative agreement on balance of ICBM power

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Chicago Daily News Service

WASHINGTON — The United States and the Soviet Union have reached tentative agreement on a freeze of intercontinental ballistic missiles, reliable Nixon administration sources have disclosed.

Barring an abrupt reversal in the Soviet position, the sources indicated rapid results could be expected when the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) resume in Helsinki in July.

President Nixon announced last Thursday that a deadlock-breaking compromise had been worked out with the Russians on how to proceed in the negotiations. His brief and cloudy statement did not reveal the extent of the progress already made.

However, the President hinted at the tentative agreement in remarks to a group of southern editors and publishers in Birmingham, Ala., Tuesday. According to a transcript released by the White House, Mr. Nixon declared:

"The two superpowers may agree that their mutual interest will be served by a limitation on the one hand on our part of defensive weapons and a limitation on the part of the Soviet Union as far as offensive weapons are concerned."

Questioned about the remarks, White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler insisted there had been no change in the President's position as he outlined it last week. But other officials conceded that Nixon had inadvertently indicated the dimensions of his tentative agreement, in secret correspondence, with Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin.

The agreement reportedly

calls for the two nations to bring their antiballistic missile (ABM) and ICBM systems into rough balance. That would require the United States to cut back on planned deployment of the safeguard ABM and for the Soviet Union to stop building new ICBMs.

It is understood that sea-based, polaris-type missiles would be put aside for a separate agreement after the Soviet Union has been allowed to catch up.

It is also understood that U.S. fighter bombers in "forward-based systems" — Western Europe and the Mediterranean — would be considered in separate negotiations on a mutual reduction of NATO and Soviet-Bloc forces.

The tentative agreement reportedly deals only with launchers and does not attempt to limit the number of warheads per missile. The United States has begun to equip its missiles with multiple warheads that can strike different targets, and the Soviet Union is expected to follow suit.

The United States has 1,000 Minuteman ICBMs and has stopped building. The Soviet Union has about 1,400 ICBMs but at least one-third of them are obsolete. It will soon have 288 of its most advanced ICBMs, the SS-9 which can carry three or more warheads, each of which could theoretically knock out a Minuteman.

United States arms negotiators have been pressing for a 300 limit on the SS-9, thereby assuring that the Minuteman force could not be eliminated in a surprise first strike.

U.S. spy satellites have also detected work at 60 new sites in the Soviet Union, stirring fears in the

Pentagon that the Russians are starting to deploy an even more advanced ICBM.

Senate Republican sources say the Central Intelligence Agency is contesting the Pentagon on the issue. The CIA reportedly believes that at least two-thirds of the new holes are for the SS-11, a smaller missile that does not have the first-strike capability of the SS-9.

Defense Department spokesman Jerry Friedheim said, however, that the CIA and the Pentagon are working from the same "agreed estimates." He said the latest

information is that the Russians may be "involved in two separate systems of silo improvement."

"Our best judgment," he continued, "remains that we expect to see new missiles or improvements of existing missiles."

Soviet negotiators at SALT are understood to have advised the U.S. delegation that they are "modernizing" — that is, hardening with concrete — rather than deploying more and more missiles. Nixon's tentative agreement with the Russians is based on that assumption.

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Caught crying wolf?

On March 7, Senator Jackson of Washington, a Democratic hawk, warned that the Soviets are "now in the process of deploying a new generation, an advanced generation of offensive (missile) systems."

A month and a half later Defense Secretary Laird reported evidence "confirming the sobering fact that the Soviet Union is involved in a new -- and apparently extensive -- ICBM construction program."

There was talk of a Russian first-strike capability and of appropriate U.S. efforts to offset it. Indeed, U.S. satellite photographs had revealed a large number of new, oversized missile silos.

But now the CIA comes in with a much milder interpretation. Chances are, the Russians are either installing more of the old missiles, putting in somewhat improved versions of them, or merely enlarging the silos and "hardening" them.

Jerry Friedheim, a Defense Department spokesman, claims it may not be all that innocuous, but concedes "we are not certain what the Soviets' intentions are." He's a lot lower-key than Secretary Laird was on April 22.

It might be comforting to think that the Defense Department simply goes by the facts and is always ready to modify its assessments on the basis of fresh intelligence. If not, it might even be of some comfort to think that publication of the CIA's downgrading of the missile sites represents a command decision. Secretary Laird's posture did not conform very well to the serious arms limitation negotiations jointly announced by President Nixon and Premier Kosygin.

Yet, the latter idea has its questionable elements. The thought that Pentagon estimates of the Soviet threat, up or down, are made up to suit the diplomatic, political or propaganda needs of the day leaves one with an uneasy feeling. If the Pentagon has been caught crying wolf at budget time, it will have succeeded only in compounding doubts of its credibility. That could be bad for the Pentagon and, in the long run, bad for the country.